



Women and poverty

The topic of women and poverty is a very timely one, particularly for those of us living in the United States who are currently inundated with political rhetoric about “welfare reform.” Most of the rhetoric concerns programs that serve primarily women and their children. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) is most frequently targeted. The problem with much of the rhetoric, and with most of the proposed policy changes, is that it is based on myths and false assumptions.

One myth is that welfare is to blame for federal and state budget deficits. In fact, AFDC spending accounts for about 1 percent of the federal budget, and about 2 percent of states’

budgets. Politicians frequently lament the “welfare cycle,” the stereotype of generational welfare dependence. In fact, 70 percent of families on AFDC leave the program within two years. Half leave within one year. Only 15 percent stay on more than five years. Many families return to AFDC, often after jobs or child care fall through, but welfare as a way of life is not a reality for most recipients.

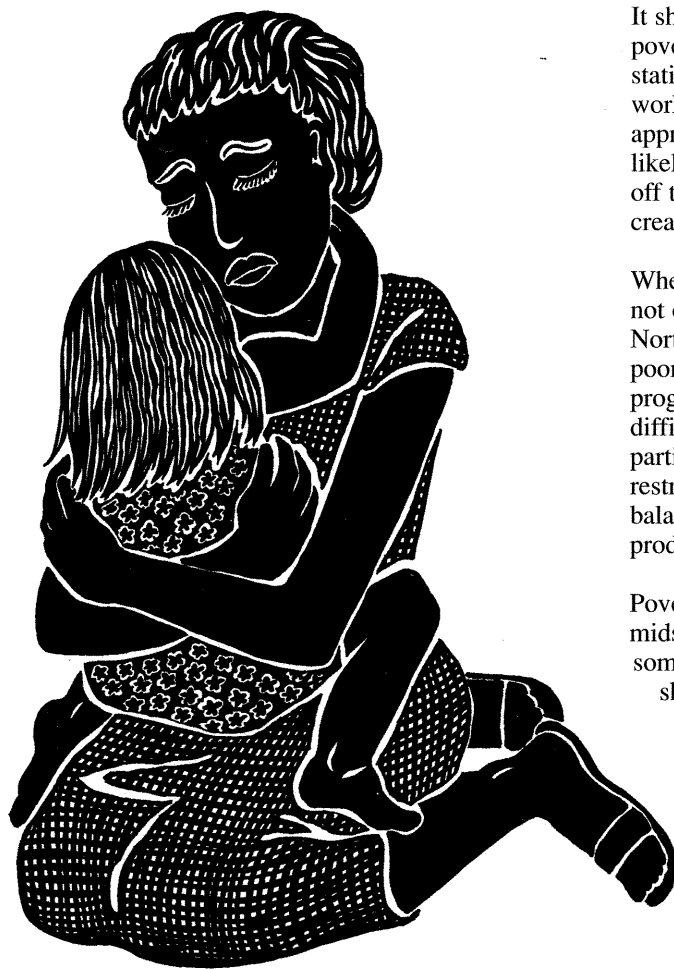
Life on welfare is far from comfortable. In a typical state, the maximum cash grant for a family of three is \$367 per month, far below the federal poverty line of \$11,186 for a family of this size. Even combined with food stamps, a family receiving the typical AFDC grant reaches only 70 percent of the poverty level. Unlike Social Security, AFDC benefits are not adjusted each year to keep pace with cost of living. According to the House Ways and Means Committee’s March 1995 Children Defense Funds Reports, inflation-adjusted AFDC benefits have decreased by 45 percent since 1970.

It should be remembered that most persons living below poverty level in the United States are actually working. The static minimum wage has served to make the lowest paid workers even poorer. A hard working parent may earn approximately \$8,000 per year at a minimum wage job, likely one without benefits. The call for getting recipients off the welfare rolls must be coupled with real efforts to create and sustain viable jobs with livable wages.

When we look at poverty from a global perspective, we see not only more than a decade of increasing inequality within North America, but also the flow of resources from the poorer to the richer countries. Structural adjustment programs have had the effect of making life even more difficult for the majority poor in many countries. Women in particular have been affected by the debt crises and restructuring processes as they are disproportionately poor, balancing low-wage work with subsistence and domestic production in meeting household needs.¹

Poverty is not always “out there.” Poverty may be in the midst of middle-class communities and churches. It is sometimes apparent, but more often hidden. To be poor is shameful. Our society has taught us that we have failed, whether our circumstances are the result of the loss of a job, divorce or other reasons beyond our control.

American culture has always had a complex mix of underlying values—“rugged individualism” and a strong work ethic, coupled with a propensity toward charity and mutual aid. One of



the effects of a very individualistic perspective is the tendency to fault the individual for her/his failure, no matter if the misfortune is a result of policies and practices that foster racial, gender or class discrimination or other inequalities or lack of opportunities. In recent years we have seen a decided shift to a blame-the-victim mentality, resulting in calls for punitive measures aimed at the most vulnerable in our society as a means of solving social problems. Examples of this would be Proposition 187, passed by the voters of California, to deny illegal immigrants basic health care, education and social services and the proposal by some congressmen to deny AFDC to teenage mothers.

One issue of *Report* obviously cannot provide an in-depth analysis of the complex causes of poverty, nor address in a comprehensive way what our response would be. However, I believe it can serve to remind us of the ways in which inequalities in our economic systems and public policies affect the everyday lives of real women. Some of the writers convey their experiences of poverty; others reflect on their own privileged status in relation to those who are disadvantaged. Through the sharing of these stories, we may be nudged to a new response—perhaps to question a judgmental attitude, to reach out to a neighbor, to volunteer at a homeless shelter, to join an advocacy group, to take a more active role in the political process.

Recently I have had the opportunity to do some volunteer work in a transitional housing program for homeless women. I was reminded once again of the resilience, determination and courage of women who have faced overwhelming odds, including battering, sexual abuse and addictions. I believe this kind of courage and hope comes through in the stories that follow.

—Betty Detwiler Sommer, *Compiler*

Betty Detwiler Sommer teaches social work at Bluffton College. She serves on the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns.

1. Lourdes Beneria and Shelly Feldman. *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty, and Women's Work.* Westview Press, 1992. p. 1.

by Regina Shands Stoltzfus

A spot of beauty in our lives

Their guild is giving money to the poor.
The worthy poor. The very very worthy
And beautiful poor. Perhaps just not too swarthy?
Perhaps just not too dirty nor too dim
Nor-passionate. In truth, what they wish
Is-something less than derelict or dull.
God shield them sharply from beggar bold!
The noxious needy ones whose battle's bold
Nonetheless for being voiceless, hits one down.

—"The Lovers of the Poor"
by Gwendolyn Brooks

In 1990, African American author Michele Wallace published a collection of essays titled *Invisibility Blues*. In these essays, the author contemplates the high visibility of black women in media and other types of representation, but the lack of these same women's voices being heard. Wallace notes in the introduction of her book, "The problem . . . is inextricably bound up with other more clear-cut social problems like illiteracy and the high school dropout rate, the homicide rate and the incidence of violence in the black community, especially against women and children; with homelessness and overcrowding in public housing, poverty, drug addiction and alcoholism, teenage pregnancy and teenage unemployment." Wallace adds that it is upon the backs of the women that the burden of poverty, homelessness and community violence falls most heavily.

Where are the poor women? What are they really like? And whose responsibility are they? Somewhere in between media images of welfare queens who live fabulously, and drugged out misfits dwelling in the gutter, live the poor women I have known, and the one that I was.

Yesterday I went to the grocery store for my midweek milk run. In addition to the milk, I also picked up cheese, juice, bread and a bunch of carnations. The flowers, which cost \$3.99, were not a necessity. They were, in fact, a luxury—a bit of brightness for the dining room, something to cheer me as I slog along during my final weeks of pregnancy. This spur of the moment purchase of something I don't need, along with thinking about the poor and welfare reform, brings to mind my brief stint of working poverty.

"Being poor teaches you that you have the choice between being silent and desperate, or learning to be vocal about your problems and what you need to solve them. Some folks call this taking care of business; some call it being obnoxious, causing problems."

Ten years ago, after leaving an abusive marriage with two small preschool boys in tow, I learned just how easy it is to become poor in America, and how difficult it is to live without financial security. I had no savings (my ex-husband cleaned out our joint account), no credit (the cards were in his name), no child support for a long while, and a low paying secretarial job that I clung to because of the health insurance. Not unlike other single moms, my top priorities each month were paying the rent (\$400) so we'd have somewhere to live, and paying the babysitter (\$200) so I'd be able to keep my job. The rest of the money, perhaps \$200 or so, went for utilities and food. The boys and I ate lots of beans and rice, peanut butter and bread. We didn't buy carnations.

And yet, what if we had? Would it have been irresponsible and wasteful to want a spot of beauty in our lives? Maybe not. But what if I had been on welfare? Just last week on a radio call-in show, I heard another person ranting about women using food stamps to buy steaks and other luxury items. By all means, cut out welfare and get these moochers to work.

What are poor women in this country really like? Are they cunning welfare queens who live high on the hog while we good, hard-working citizens pay their way, or are they pitiful trashy waifs who just can't manage their lives and need us to tell them what's good for them? If only it were that simple.

I was lucky enough to have the support of family and friends, although I hated to lean on them. The church lent me money, but I was terribly ashamed. The children and I lived with my parents for a while. Eventually I moved to a slightly better paying job with better benefits—with a women's labor advocacy organization. Being poor opened my eyes to issues of being black and female that I had never considered before, as it had for many of the women I worked with.

One of my projects while working with this group was leading workshops with women who were on welfare and in job-training programs. Our job retention program focused on teaching skills that help a woman keep a job—what to wear to work, how to play office politics, showing up on time. This is stuff that seems simple, but really isn't once you consider how difficult it is to manage your life when you don't have money. Take being on time—a reasonable expectation and not so hard to accomplish unless you have no car and you have one child in school who takes the school bus, which doesn't come until after you need to leave for work. And you have another child in day care, which is located on a different bus route than the one you need to take to work. And one morning the baby has a fever and the day care doesn't take sick kids.

Being poor teaches you that you have the choice between being silent and desperate, or learning to be vocal about your problems and what you need to solve them. Some folks call this taking care of business; some call it being obnoxious, causing problems. It can cost you a job. So in our workshops, we talked about ways of getting what you need on the job—dealing with difficult people, lobbying for better benefits and higher pay, working with racist supervisors, handling sexual harassment—in ways that wouldn't get you fired.

For the most part, the women I met in this program really wanted out of poverty and off welfare. They worked hard to learn job management skills, and graduated from the programs. What we couldn't guarantee was a job with good pay and adequate benefits. We couldn't guarantee good safe schools for their kids, quality affordable housing or protection from violent men. These are some of the real culprits that keep women in poverty.

Regina Shands Stoltzfus works out of her home office in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, as staff associate for urban peacemaking with Mennonite Conciliation Service (MCS), a program of MCC. She is a parent and a member of the Lee Heights Community Church.



"Women are expected to look after everyone's needs except their own."

by Charlotte Siemens

Poverty has a woman's face

For two and a half years (1990–1992) I lived in Nicaragua with my husband and our son. We lived in a small rural village about 60 miles from the capital, Managua. My job was primarily to work with different women's groups on issues of nutrition, health and economics. Now back in North America, my encounters with my friends in Central America often come via newsletter or personal letter. When I read the accounts of what is happening in Nicaragua politically and economically, I become saddened. What does it mean that 70 percent of people's needs aren't met? I can't fathom all the isolated cases of people, but I recognize that poverty is not just isolated figures, but it is lives of people, usually women and children. Poverty has a woman's face.

The face of poverty is the face of my former neighbor Olivia who has six children and a husband who is unable to find work. Every morning for two years, I woke up at 5 a.m. to the sound of Olivia making tortillas, so that by 6:30 a.m. her sons could be on the street calling, "Tortillas, tortillas." For a few pennies, I was able to enjoy hot tortillas every morning and evening. Olivia worked all day and often most

of the evening for a mere 10 cordobas (\$2 U.S.). That was barely enough to feed her family of eight. While our son was flourishing from his balanced diet of beans, rice and tortillas coupled with fruits and vegetables, her sons ate tortillas and beans and often just tortillas and salt. Olivia deserves more. Olivia's family deserves more. She is more than a statistic—she is a woman living in poverty.

Poverty has the face of my dear friend Petrona. Petrona was my Nicaraguan counterpart and very active in the Mennonite church. Petrona lives close to the

river with her husband and five children. They have no electricity and no steady income. Petrona often told me that she lived by faith. I believe she lived by prayer. Rather than look for part-time employment, of which there is little, Petrona would accompany me visiting the many churches in the countryside. We would walk for hours together to visit Mennonite women or help coordinate a feeding program for children. Seldom did she complain, and I was always struck by her persevering spirit.

But poverty takes its toll. A few months ago an MCCer wrote to tell me that Petrona was very ill and depressed. The rains hadn't come and her family lost their crop. Because of the deteriorating health situation, her daughter's child became infected with meningitis and died. Her husband was also out of work. Cerebrally, I knew about the difficult situation she was in. Somehow I had convinced myself that Petrona was different, that she would be able to rise above the clutches of poverty's grasp and escape the cruelties of watching her family suffer. But poverty is unyielding and heartless; its endless toil leaves its mark. Because of the economic crisis there, women like Petrona are often responsible for the health needs of their families and communities. Women are expected to look after everyone's needs except their own. They often develop a nervous condition of stress or low-grade depression. Petrona was anemic and depressed; she needed help. Medicine, nutritious food and prayer got her back on her feet again after a few months.

The faces of Petrona and Olivia are etched in my mind. They form a small fraction of the whole. Despite incredible odds, these women keep on surviving. These women are caught in the cycle of poverty; their situation will not change. Poverty statistics are more than just numbers—they are women's faces defined by sweat, determination and lines of struggle.

Charlotte Siemens resides in Winnipeg with her husband and son. She is currently completing a degree in education. She and her family served with MCC in Nicaragua.



"Negotiating the maze of public assistance is often time-consuming, confusing, intimidating and overwhelming."

by Denise McOwen

"Angel"

It's Friday and Angel (a composite) is late for work at the Women's Bean Project in Denver, Col. She has arrived on time only one day this week. And, as usual, she has a ready excuse. This morning she was detained because she moved in with a different friend, is on a new bus route and doesn't know the schedule.

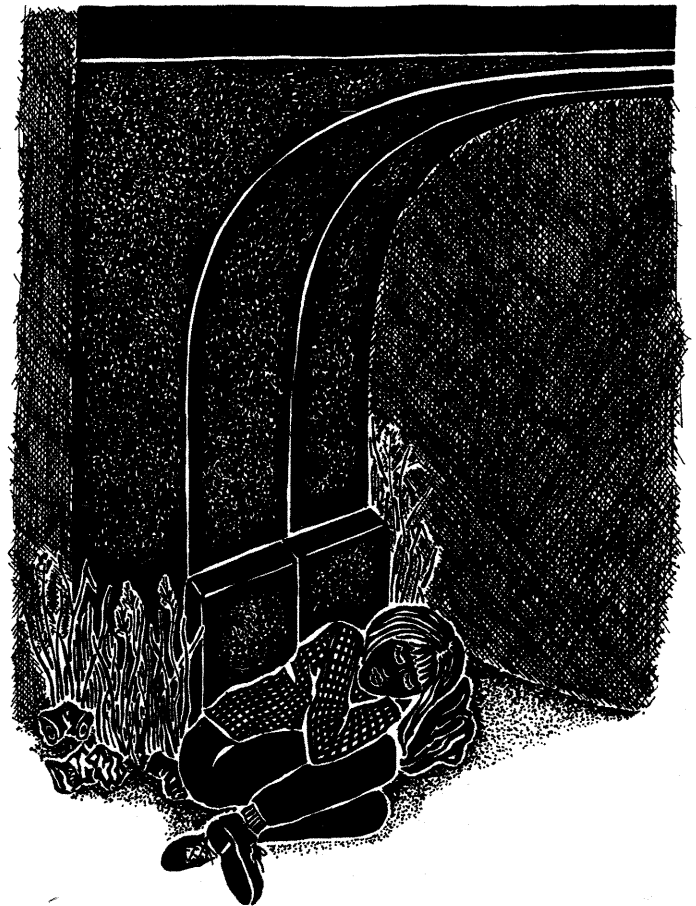
Angel is constantly on the move. She will turn over her entire two-week paycheck for a small space with this friend, rather than risk a shelter where she may wait an hour or more for the lottery drawing for an available bed. If none is available or her number is not drawn, she would have to seek shelter under a bridge along the Platt River or another equally unpleasant option. Angel suspects her rent money will be spent by her friend on drugs and alcohol, and expects a request for more money before her next paycheck is due.

Despite chronic tardiness, Angel has exhibited improvement in her work and social skills since she was first hired three months ago. Once she began to show confidence during group discussions, Angel shared some of her story. She was born in Denver, to a mother addicted to heroin. There has been no mention of her father. Angel has had a lengthy chemical dependency and been in and out of prison.

Her lack of positive life experiences and role models has rendered her incapable of effective motherhood and two of her three children have been permanently removed from her custody. Her third daughter, born in prison, is currently in a foster home. Since the birth of this child, Angel has had difficulty holding a job for any length of time. Angel does not know what kind of career she would like to pursue; she just knows she wants a home and the means to live comfortably. Part of her problem is an inability to articulate her skills, strengths and weaknesses.

Angel brings a lot of baggage to the marketplace. Just filling out an application that would invite an interview is a difficult task. Her hope is that the Women's Bean Project (WBP) will be the avenue for transition to a more stable life.

The vision of the founder of WBP, Jossy Eyre, is to provide an environment in which disadvantaged women can learn work, life and social skills while earning a wage enabling



them to secure a job/career that leads to self-sufficiency. The program is set up in three phases. During the first phase, lasting approximately six weeks, 20 paid hours are offered weekly. This schedule allows time off during the business day for women to meet requirements set by social service agencies and for conducting personal business.

The focus of phase one is to learn the specific tasks involved in packaging soup mixes for sale, and to begin working at marketing skills and being accountable for working and staying on task while being paid. Specific life skills taught during this phase include finding affordable housing, participating in cooperative group ventures, openness in relationships, articulating opinions and feelings, demonstrating reliability, developing and/or maintaining a positive attitude and courtesy.

In phase two, approximately seven months, paid hours are increased to about 30 per week. The additional skills taught during this phase include order taking, shipping systems, the basics of marketing, production scheduling, resume writing and effective interviewing. During this time each woman also joins one of the board committees, attends at least one board of directors meeting, and begins the development of public speaking abilities by delivering a presentation to co-workers on a topic of their choice or a public presentation about the project. Life skills taught include budgeting, volunteering, developing an ability to accept constructive criticism, and assertiveness.

The focus of phase three, the final three months, is to prepare women to leave the WBP and obtain a job

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elsewhere. During this phase, women develop leadership skills, aid in the orientation and training of new program participants, and are taught the basics of a job application process. This weaning phase includes an earnest job search and women are encouraged to develop outside support systems.

Through the duration of the program the WBP offers a weekly support group in which everyone (administrative staff and program participants) has an opportunity for personal reflection, the development of trust, and to risk being vulnerable to develop relationships.

Exposure to the work and mission of the WBP leads to recognition that the issue of poverty has been oversimplified by government, media and the general public. Poverty is anything but simple. One common stereotype of women living in poverty is that with no job to go to they are unmotivated to get up in the morning and have little to do other than collect a monthly welfare check. The reality is that basic daily survival requires the time consuming elements of finding shelter, food, clothing and health care. Negotiating the maze of public assistance is often time-consuming, confusing, intimidating and overwhelming. Often, women will choose to refuse the benefits of public assistance because it can be dehumanizing, demeaning, bureaucratically burdensome and most of all, controlling.

The WBP, through wages and employment training, provides an opportunity to escape the social welfare system. Due to the severe social disabilities many women bring to the project, success can only be measured incrementally. While the goal of the project is to mainstream women into stable full-time employment, just seeing positive change is evidence of the worth of a program like this. Graduation from the project is only the first step on the path to self-sufficiency.

Denise McOwen and husband Dennis are serving a term with MCC in Denver. They are the parents of four boys.



by Florence Driedger

Poverty of women in Canada

The International Year of the Family produced many articles that provided an overview of what is happening in families—the changes, the impact of public policies, comparisons with other nations, the increase of women and children living in poverty, suggested responses to problems—and challenged Canadians to reflect on ourselves.

We are living in one of the most preferred countries in the world—rich in resources and in a society that is perceived as safe and caring. But what is the reality, especially as women and children experience it?

Public policy in North America tends to dichotomize women and children's issues and often pits children against women rather than seeing them as interdependent. For example, in Canada when children's needs are highlighted, the implicit message is that women are not being adequate mothers. When women's needs are being addressed, seldom is there reference to the impact on children and what changes all have to make so that women and children's needs are both attended to.

The reality is that if a child is poor the mother is poor. Almost one in five children are poor, and if you live in a single parent family, the poverty gap is approximately \$9,000 greater than in a two-parent poor family. The average income for lone parent families is less than half of two-parent families. In 1991, 62 per cent of the single parent families lived below the poverty line—an increase of 7 percent over 1981. One third of these families lived on \$10,000 less than the poverty line. The reality also is that employment does not guarantee you the opportunity to move out of poverty. At one time if you worked at minimum wage you were at approximately 80 percent of the poverty line for a family of two parents and two children. Now two people on minimum wage can only manage to reach the 80 percent target. So not only is the poverty rate high, but those that are poor are very, very poor. And women and children are the primary victims.

The poverty rate for almost all family types increased between 1981 and 1991. The one exception is the elderly. Their poverty rate dropped from 21.9 percent in 1981 to 9



Also significant is that while Canadians have stated categorically that family is important to them, there is little understanding that my neighbor's family is important and that I have some responsibility for it. When plumbing breaks down in our homes, we see it as the responsible thing to do to call in the plumber to do repairs. In fall we see it as responsible to have the furnace checked to make sure that everything is in working condition. When families have troubles, however, we allocate blame to the parents (most often implicitly the mother) and see them as irresponsible. And should they call on the services of the community, they are considered lesser in the eyes of many.

We need a major reorientation to families and the importance of families that includes men, women and children. When we as a society decided that it was beneath the dignity of Canadian society to have our elders die in abject poverty, we did something about it. We need to do the same about family life. We cannot go about it by addressing one member of the family, whether the mother or the child. When we have poor families, we have poor women, children and men. When we have poor women, we have poor families. When we have poor families, we have lower educational achievements, poorer health, a stagnant economy. Economies that have taken a very harsh, capitalist, non-state interventionist approach in recent years have not experienced the growth that was predicted and in the process are experiencing more suicide, social problems and youth disillusionment.

We in Canada need to look at what is needed for healthy family living. It is a two-person job. When only one parent is present, as has been the case for many years (in 1931, 13.6 per cent of families were lone-parent and in 1991, 12.9 per cent), we need, as a community, to consider ways in which we can be supportive of the adult in the family. We must say to parents, whether lone parents or two-parent families, that it is responsible to call on the community for help and that we as a community value their contribution and we will assist where we can.

Florence Driedger recently retired from social services administration in Saskatchewan. She served as moderator for the General Conference Mennonite Church from 1987 to 1992 and is currently on assignment with MCC in the Ukraine.

percent in 1991. As the Vanier Institute of the Family states, "The good news is that Canadians have proven that poverty can be beaten. The major drop in poverty rates for senior families proves that when governments get serious, poverty can be alleviated."

But why are women still poor? Research shows that poverty has many long-term effects, but the political will to change the situation remains illusive. There are many reasons for poverty. We read about the issues of power of men, systemic reasons, lack of women in policy position and in political roles. Let me pose another more fundamental possible reason. As long as we have the view that each one is responsible for oneself alone and that if one cannot take care of oneself it is her/his fault, we will continue to have poverty. This does not mean that women are less able to care for themselves than men. Despite the media publicity on the importance of men in the family, women still continue to carry the greatest load by far of child care and household tasks. They do not have the time or energy to have equal income to men. Even if they have equal income, the family care cost requirements mean that there is less remaining income for investment and wealth creation.

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"Giving out food and clothing and providing adequate housing are important components of ministry to women living in poverty. However, providing a community of support and friendship is also an essential ministry."

by Ruth Shank Martin

The loneliness of poverty

For many women, poverty and loneliness are daily realities. Often the supports that are needed to cope with everyday life are not available to those who live on social assistance. The loneliness of poverty for women extends even into our Mennonite church communities, where we think this problem does not exist.

In our churches, we alienate women who are poor and drive them to the fringes of church life by our judgmental attitudes. We make unsolicited comments about how they spend their limited resources and ask them questions that we would not think of asking other women. A middle-class woman is complimented on how cute her children look in their new outfits, while a woman living on limited income is asked where she got the new clothes; she hears clearly the unspoken condemnation that she should not be spending her money on things like that but rather on "essentials."

In the city, women who live on limited income are often alone in their struggles, far from family and the support systems of community that most of us in the Mennonite world take for granted. The stigma of being on welfare and family benefits causes further alienation from the mainstream. There is shame when there is not enough money to buy things for the children that their friends have. Needing to use food banks and thrift stores year in and year out to make ends meet adds to the loneliness and frustration. Why go to the mall when there is no money to be spent there?

In my years of work at the Welcome Inn Community Center in Hamilton, Ont., I have spoken in many places about our activities. A common response among the older generation is, "We came here with nothing and were able to work our way out of poverty. Why can't these women do that too?"

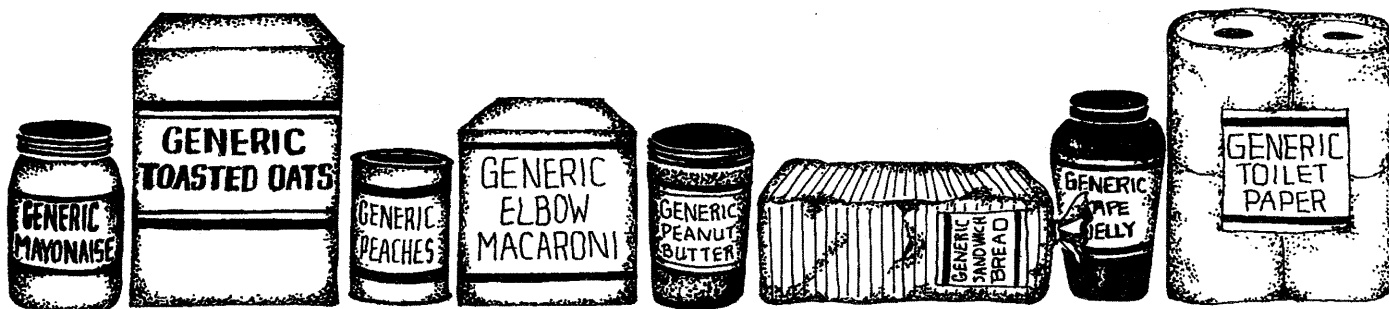
There are many reasons why this is not easily done. One very important factor is that in our Mennonite communities there was and continues to be much support for each other—a rich heritage of community that is often hard to find in the city. Where does a lonely woman living in poverty in the city find that kind of support?

Many on welfare face a future that holds no hope for anything better. When making ends meet is a daily struggle, the struggle gets old and hard to take. When every shopping trip means buying no-name products and always looking for bargains, it becomes tiring. When there is seldom enough money to provide the little extras that make life meaningful, depression sets in. A recent radio news item stated that 38 percent of Canadian women suffer from some form of depression, with the single largest common denominator among these women being an income of under \$20,000. Poverty is a lonely and depressing experience. How can we help to change this situation? One answer is to offer community, a place where there is a supportive "family," a place where there is acceptance, a place where there are activities provided both for the women and for the family, a place where loneliness is replaced with love and longlasting friendships. Welcome Inn Community Center works to make this happen through programs that provide a social life for women struggling to live with limited resources.

Giving out food and clothing and providing adequate housing are important components of ministry to women living in poverty. However, providing a community of support and friendship is also an essential ministry. We must not forget about the emotional, social and spiritual needs—a ministry of "doing with" rather than "doing for."

The vision and work of Welcome Inn Community Center are beautifully described in the following poem, written by Sue Parker, who is currently part of the program here.

Ruth Shank Martin is program administrator at Welcome Inn Community Center in Hamilton, Ontario. Earlier she was a nurse; more recently she has enjoyed taking seminary courses and preaching.





by Sue Parker

There

There . . .

There, nestled in the humble heart
Of my home town's North End
An unassuming structure stands
Where anyone can find a friend.

There is no membership to buy,
No costly user's fee,
No secret password is required,
No need to come on bended knee.

There, many troubled souls have come
To find lost hope; to those who care
With open hearts, and open minds,
To those with peace and love to share.

There, behind those two green doors,
Wait coffee, tea and conversation.
From smiling lips come gentle words
Without a hint of condemnation.

"There's no such place!" the cynics say,
"For you to tell such lies is sin!"
"There is," I say with confidence,
"You'll find it there . . . at Welcome Inn."

Sue Parker is on staff at the Welcome Inn Community Center in Hamilton, Ont., through a government program that helps people on social assistance learn skills that will enable them to qualify for work in the mainstream job market.

by Cindy Hines Kurfman

Surviving the system: A Mennonite woman's experience with public assistance

In December 1994 I needed to sign up for food stamps and a Pennsylvania Access Card (medical). Although I lived in the country, all services were only available in the city of Lancaster, 22 miles from my home. Also, telephone calls to Lancaster city were long-distance.

When I called the County Assistance Office (Welfare), I was told I would have to come into the office to pick up the application form; they do not send it out in the mail. The application itself is very long and calls for a lot of documentation. This meant that I had to look up many items and compile the proof. I was glad that I am literate and keep good records.

The receptionist at the Assistance Office informed me that once I had the form filled out, I would need to come back to the office with my form and documentation at 7 a.m. I was told that they do not make appointments. When I asked why, I was informed that welfare recipients do not keep appointments. It was a refrain that I was to hear repeatedly—my type of person is unreliable and therefore not worthy of appointments like the rest of society. (I also learned this was the case at the Domestic Relations Office where women must go to file for child support.)

This is the scenario each week at the Lancaster County Assistance Office and the Domestic Relations Office: If you want to have hope of being seen by someone that day, you must arrive by at least 7 a.m. and stand in line outside the office. (At Domestic Relations the lobby opens at 7:30 a.m.) At 8 a.m. those waiting may file into the office and take a number, take a seat and then wait for hours more to discover whether or not there will be time for them to be seen that day or whether they will have to make the attempt again another day.

Fortunately for me, I did not have to do this. A friend-in-the-know informed me that persons with disabilities could get appointments. I have chemical sensitivities that make it

"I did not feel that I could bring myself to go to a clinic that would treat people with such little respect."

difficult for me to breathe in a room of people smelling of cigarettes and perfume, so I was able to drop off my papers and make an appointment. It meant an extra trip, but it was worth it.

At my appointment I was given a list of further documents I would need before my paperwork could be processed. This meant a trip to the Social Security Administration on the opposite side of Lancaster, where there were more lines, numbers, forms and waiting. I was glad I had a babysitter for my two youngest children that day; it took me all day to accomplish what was necessary even with an appointment. I was also glad I had my own car.

When I had my extra documentation together, I was allowed to mail this in. Then, several weeks later, I received five envelopes in the mail, one for each member of the family stating the amount of food we would receive for December and January and one stating that we would receive Pennsylvania Access Cards. On another day we received four envelopes with our medical cards. What a waste of money to send all these papers and cards in separate envelopes.

Another card also came in the mail and this card informed me how many food stamps I could receive for December and January. I had been informed by my caseworker that this card should be taken to my bank to be exchanged for food stamps. They do not send food stamps through the mail.

So I took the card to my bank. The bank informed me that only the main office could give out food stamps. So I went to the main office. There I was informed I could not receive the food stamps because I did not have an identification card. I did not have any idea what this was, so she described it to me. I came to the conclusion that I had not received this card, so I went home and called my "worker." My caseworker informed me that the identification card had been (or should have been) sent out several weeks prior. She said she would send me another one.

Several days later I received my identification card and drove to the bank only to find that it was closed, so I tried again the next day. Finally I received the food stamps and was able to go grocery shopping.

Soon after this my second daughter jumped off a forbidden rock in the neighbor's yard and knocked a front tooth loose. After some time it was not improving and was, in fact, turning gray, so I called our dentist. I learned that the dentist did not accept the medical card; I would have to find a new dentist.



I called the receptionist at the local Welsh Mountain Medical Center and asked if medical cards were accepted there. They were, but I was informed that they did not recognize emergencies if the person held a medical card. I would have to wait six months to get an appointment with their clinic.

Then I located an 800 number for questions related to the Pennsylvania Access Card. The woman stated that by law the County

Assistance Office had to provide me with a list of medical care providers in my area. She explained that this list could be printed out by specialty and zip code. She told me that all providers had provider numbers and were, therefore, known. She told me that each office had a person in charge of this and told me that person's title.

Armed with this helpful information, I called the County Assistance Office and asked for the proper supervisor. When I was connected with him, he told me that it would be several weeks before I would receive a printout. I asked if he could please read me the list for my area over the telephone. He told me that it would take too long. I told him that I just wanted a list of dentists in my area. He said they did not do it that way and transferred me to my caseworker, now a different worker from the one I had originally. The two conferred together, and my case worker informed me that there were only three places in the entire county that would accept my medical card for dental care. All three were in the city.

So I began calling them. The first one took only cleft palate cases. The second one did not take appointments for people with medical cards. To be seen I would have to come at 7 a.m. on a Thursday and wait in line outside of their office, although they told me that people often arrive at 6 a.m. Only the first 10 clients who took a number when the doors opened at 8 a.m. would have a possibility of being seen. The rest would have to come back the next week.

I explained that I lived 45 minutes away and that my oldest daughter's school bus did not arrive until 7:30 a.m. I was told to get a sitter. Then I asked for directions to the clinic. I was put on hold and transferred to another person. This person gave me directions but was very short with me and

"Through these experiences I have learned that control of information is a form of power used against those who live in poverty."

ended up by saying that he did not have time to give information to people like me. I cried when I got off of the telephone. I did not feel that I could bring myself to go to a clinic that would treat people with such little respect.

So I called the third and last telephone number. This place informed me that they did not see children. I asked if they had any recommendations. They gave me the name and number of a dentist that happened to be just a few blocks away from the County Assistance Office!

This dentist made an appointment for my daughter for the following week and treated us with dignity. I then made an appointment for my other daughter and myself to have our teeth cleaned, but I found out after our arrival that my card would not cover me for dental care.

Later I compiled a list of four other dentists whose names were given to me by friends. And surely there must be more that are available. Yet I was never able to get a printout from the Assistance Office. When confronted about my experience, they stated that the list simply "changes too fast for us to update." Yet every dentist must fill out paperwork and receive a number from the state in order to provide service to persons with medical cards. And because the Assistance Office is only giving out the names of three clinics, these clinics are overburdened and burned out from trying to care for all of the welfare clients in the entire county.

Through these experiences I have learned that control of information is a form of power used against those who live in poverty. A person without good self-esteem can be run down by the system. I have been like a person trying to find my way with a blindfold on while the sighted onlookers remain silent even when they see that I am about to turn in the wrong direction. Or perhaps I am like a person trying to play a complicated game while learning the rules only by making mistakes.

This fall I am going to college, and it is my hope that I will become independent and escape from this harsh system before I begin to see myself as a part of it. I believe that the church also has a responsibility to help their own who are in poverty or at least provide people with an advocate to help them through the government system. We Mennonites are often concerned with poverty in other parts of the world, but we do not see the hidden pockets of poverty in our own churches—until we are thrust into it ourselves.

Cindy Hines Kurfman moved from Pennsylvania to Oregon in May. She is a mother, student and freelance writer.

by Motšeo Senyane and Sophie Tiessen

Hope for Mpho's daughters

According to a recently published report entitled "The Situation of Children and Women in Lesotho," poverty is on the increase. The report states that in 1993, 65 percent of households did not have the minimum M50.00 (approx. \$15 US) required to survive per person, per month. The report further makes note that "there is no doubt that female headed households are amongst the poorest in Lesotho."

Every morning we awake to the sounds of pigeons on our roofs, cows mooing, chickens cackling and the gentle sweeping of the neighbors yards. We awake refreshed, our outer and inner selves filled with an aura of peace. In those early hours the challenges and struggles of the day feel very far away.

The day begins as the two of us start weaving through the streets of our community of Mohalalitoe, chattering and laughing about— what else—our life experiences. It isn't long before we find ourselves in the market, trekking through a maze of street vendors who are trying to sell their daily stocks of vegetables, fruit, freshly cooked meat, roasted maize, herbs, etc. If you look closely you find that a significantly high percentage of the vendors are women with children. Mot'eo recognizes a friend, Mpho (not her real name), with whom she went to high school. Mot'eo briefly recounts her knowledge of Mpho's family story:

"Mpho's mother, Mathabo (not real name) has, for as long as I can remember, been selling meat and fruit on Maseru's main street, Kingsway. You will see her there every morning. I don't know how Mathabo came to be a street vendor. However, I do know that she didn't want the same life for her three daughters. Mathabo saw education as one way for her daughters to experience a better life. She committed herself to sending her children to school (back then enrollment costs for one high school student were about R67 per quarter, plus parents had to find money to buy books and school supplies)."

"Mpho was in Form B (Grade 9) when she eloped with a young Mosotho miner. Mathabo had pleaded with Mpho to complete her studies before entering marriage, but to no avail. It wasn't long before problems started in the marriage.

"How hard are we actually trying to change the context within which many women are finding themselves?"

The miner husband who was stationed in the Republic of South Africa wouldn't come home for visits. He neglected to forward monies to help support Mpho and their three children. I could go on and on. The fact remains that Mpho, officially separated from her husband and with a Form A education, has been left to support her three children and herself in the only way she can—Mpho, 26 years old, is now selling meat and fruit with her mother on Kingsway Avenue."

In one moment our conversation had been altered from the gaiety of life to the harshness of life. The above story is common, in one way or the other, to many women in Lesotho. There are a significant number of Basotho husbands who go to work in the mines. Although it could be argued to a certain point, in essence Basotho men have freedom to decide when and if they want to leave their families to go and work elsewhere, but the Mosotho wife does not have that same option. Regardless of whether the husband comes home or not, brings money home or not, abuses the family or not, the wife is left to maintain the home—no matter what the cost.

In summary, Mpho, the Mosotho wife in this story, has become one of the 65 percent who are categorized as poor. We (Motseoa and Sophie) both work for Transformation Resource Center, a center committed to "empowering people" out of a context of poverty. We realize that the causes of poverty are complex, but why have we not even come close to eradicating poverty to date? Does it mean there is no hope for the Mathabos and Mphos of our world to escape a life of poverty? Does it mean we have to give up trying?

No, we don't think that TRC, MCC or any other organization or persons should stop the fight against poverty. However, the question that further enters our minds is—how hard are we actually trying to change the context within which many women are finding themselves? Jesus' story of the rich who gave lots of money and the widow who gave two copper coins—all that she had—comes to mind (Mark 14:41–44). On this day we, being part of the middle class, were humbled as 1) We realized the dignity with which Basotho women facing poverty, hold their heads. They don't need pity. These women are finding ways to survive, no matter how difficult the situation. 2) We need to spend more time listening to Basotho women in situations of poverty. They often have answers. The problem is more a lack of the financial resources to execute their plans. 3) As the widow who gave her all, these women are giving their all, not for themselves, but rather for others—their children, husbands, parents-in-law, perhaps even for you. This often comes at the expense of their own health and well-being. What is the hope for Mpho's daughters?

The solutions do not run off our tongues easily. However, we challenge women, both as Christians and sisters, to remain steadfast in supporting Mathabo and Mpho's efforts to end the destructive cycle of poverty. May we gain our hope and courage to give our all for the betterment of all women's and children's lives, just as these same women have given for their sisters and children.

Motšeo Senyane is a single mother of one. She is currently working as a community development worker for Transformation Resource Center (an ecumenical peace and justice organization in Maseru, Lesotho). She is a long-term friend of MCC and MCCers. She participated in the International Visitor Exchange Program (IVEP) in 1989–90. Sophie Tiessen is an MCC worker, seconded to TRC, where she works as librarian. She has worked in Lesotho since May 1994. She earlier served with MCC in Zimbabwe and the MCC Canada office in Winnipeg.

"But the hardest thing of all to bear is the pity, insensitivity, condescension and lack of trust that the poor often experience in the community and in the church."

"The false idols of security, superiority, self-righteousness, religiosity and pretense can be replaced by the heart of Christ—a heart that recognizes our mutuality in our need."

by Elsie Goerzen

"Open Door": Loving my neighbor as myself

How do we as followers of Christ respond appropriately to the needs of the poor? In James 2:14–17 we read that our faith alone, unless accompanied by deeds, is dead. Just having concern for the poor, and doing nothing about it, has no value. And yet, it is possible to live in such a way that we do not even cross paths with people who are poor.

About 12 years ago, I began to think about the words of Christ: "Of her to whom much is given, much will be required!" (Luke 12:48). I began to acknowledge how much I had been given—the wealth of emotional support in a large and loving family, a husband who loved and encouraged me, a church community where I felt I belonged. Consequently, by volunteering for a child abuse prevention agency in our community, I became involved with women who live below the poverty line. It was culture shock for me.

The contrast between my life and theirs was dramatic. And yet, as I grew to know and love these friends, I recognized the strength, courage and wisdom that these women often displayed in the face of great adversity. A dream began to grow—to bring these "poor" women together with other women like me, who had "been given much." As the dream was expanding, I heard of "Open Door," a program of support for single mothers with preschool children that was operating in two locations in our province. Soon after, with 10 women who now shared this dream, we established a third branch of Open Door in our community in 1987. Today there are 10 branches in British Columbia, coordinated by Elvera Corben, who is an MCC Voluntary Service worker.

Through the avenue of Open Door, we have opportunity to provide physical, emotional and spiritual care and support for single mothers and their children. A weekly program for the mothers and children is offered. All services provided by Open Door are free. Physical support is offered by giving the mothers a break from the constant demands of parenting alone while the children enjoy a preschool program. A nutritious lunch is served and access to food and clothing closets is provided. Emergency help is available in times of distress. Emotional support is given through friendship and understanding. Workshops are offered in areas of need and

interest. Professional counseling is available. Spiritual support comes in unconditional love and acceptance of the mothers and children, and through optional Bible discussions that give opportunity to explore who God is and to come to know God. Open Door is staffed by volunteers who want to follow the teaching of Christ to "love your neighbor as yourself."

At the Sardis Open Door, the branch I am involved in, 35 families are served by approximately 35 volunteers every Tuesday. This regular program time provides opportunity for friendships to be established between the volunteers and the mothers and for relationships to grow. The mothers who attend Open Door also give each other encouragement and support.

The women who have become my friends and sisters have taught me much. I am learning that poverty means much more than "an insufficient access to goods, services and conditions of life that have come to be accepted as basic to a decent standard of living" (Economic Council of Canada). I have asked some of my friends to define poverty for me. They tell me it means far more than physical need. Poverty means a loss of control in life, inability to improve your own situation, and helplessness. It means brokenness, low self-esteem and anger. It is isolation, insignificance and despair. But the hardest thing of all to bear is the pity, insensitivity, condescension and lack of trust that the poor often experience in the community and in the church.

How do I, as a follower of Christ, respond appropriately to these huge needs? First, I need to recognize my own powerlessness to change anything but my own heart's attitude and thus acknowledge my inner poverty. I must continually accept the gift of God's presence in my life before I can offer it to others. In facing my own poverty, my own sinfulness, I find healing and acceptance in Christ. Then it becomes possible to accept others unconditionally, like Christ does. The false idols of security, superiority, self-righteousness, religiosity and pretense can be replaced by the heart of Christ—a heart that recognizes our mutuality in our need.

I do not have any answers for anyone else, but I can stand in solidarity with the poor. As we recognize our common humanity and neediness, we can look for answers together, or perhaps simply learn to live with the questions. As we give to each other, we also receive from each other. In being with each other in our mutual brokenness, we find healing together. As we recognize Christ in each other, we are free to hear Christ calling each of us in a unique way!

(continued on page 14)

News and verbs

About 125 women from Canada and the United States gathered May 26–28 at Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, B.C., for the 1995 inter-Mennonite **Women in Ministry Conference**. The theme of the conference was “Unity and Uniqueness in Christ.” There was a special focus on Christian women around the world, and the

featured speakers were Elizabeth Tapia, United Methodist pastor from Dasmariñas, Philippines, and Susan Classen, MCC worker for 10 years in Bolivia and El Salvador. A controversy had preceded the conference, when a number of local leaders successfully pressured MCC B.C. to withdraw its sponsorship of the conference.

Deborah Fast of Ontario has been appointed editor of the new **MCC magazine**, a *Common Place*.

Katie Funk Wiebe of Wichita, Kan., served as **interim editor of *Christian Leader***, the U.S. Mennonite Brethren denominational publication, from January to May, 1995, while editor Don Ratzlaff was on sabbatical.

John Kavanaugh, in his beautiful book entitled *Faces of Poverty, Faces of Christ* states that “An evangelical faith in Christ, which is in its deepest reality an inescapable and irreplaceable option for the poor, will be unleashed in us only when we gaze, finally unguarded, upon

the face of the devastated, whom we would touch
the face of simplicity in personal presence
the face of the one who sees and loves us even in our sin
and the face of our precious but frightening vulnerability.”

Elsie Goerzen lives in Sardis, B.C. She is a member of the MCC B.C. Committee on Women's Concerns. She enjoys music and gardening and has two grown children.

Letters

The 1995 Women in Ministry Conference [May 26–28 in Abbotsford, B.C.] was like a very special family gathering. Over 100 women who serve in various capacities in churches all over North America participated. These women share a special sisterhood within the larger Mennonite family. Like most women in today's complicated world they have multiple roles. The conference highlighted their ministry roles. They are pastors, chaplains, seminary professors, counsellors, worship leaders, lay preachers, etc.

The conference was a forum for discussing both the difficulties and joys of ministry. The greatest difficulties arise from the lack of acceptance in ministerial roles that women often experience. The greatest cause for joy comes when lack of acceptance turns in affirmation and recognition.

I wish to publicly thank the organizing committee for providing me with the opportunity to participate in such a conference. I wish to thank the Women's Concerns Committee of MCC B.C. for initiating the idea of having the conference in B.C.

My spirit was refreshed by the beautiful worship services. My call to ministry was affirmed and strengthened by the opportunity to share with the other ministering sisters. My understanding of theology was deepened by the creative combination of teaching and liturgy. Thank you, sisters, for sharing your God-given gifts with me.

—Linda Matties, Abbotsford, B.C.

by Karen Kellett

Plankton of Hope

So small we can't see them with the naked eye.
So meaningful no life would exist without them—

“Our food is almost gone.
Do we have rice, or onion soup tonight?”

“This bill, that repair, this year and the next”

From the pit of my despair come
Plankton of Hope.
Hear me as I cry, the pit is so deep.
I claw and I scrape.
Clinging to the smallest of Hope's vines.
Here it's so dark, not much light do I see.

I CAN'T DO THIS ALONE

I'm in despair, and I remember those Plankton of Hope.
God's promise: “This will not last,
I care for the poor and fatherless.”

There are always, always,
Plankton of Hope.
They keep me from falling farther
Down in this chasm called “Poverty.”
God. Thank you for all those
Plankton you provide.

Karen Kellett has been coming to the Open Door program for over five years. She wrote this poem in February 1995, about her experience with poverty. It was inspired by an illustration used at a workshop offered at Open Door. The speaker encouraged the women to see all the beautiful little things in life as plankton that nourish us, just as the plankton that float in the sea nourish the larger sea creatures. Karen says, “This poem was difficult for me to write. I don't normally think of myself as an angry or depressed person. I'm genuinely a happy, confident person. To write this poem, I had to remind myself of the anger and despair one feels when there is nothing to look forward to but a never-ending cycle of poverty. I found myself very depressed as I thought of what it was I wanted to say. Writing this poem reminded me that I am living in poverty. It also reminded me that there is a way out, a light at the end of the tunnel, if you will. Thank you for asking me to reflect on this. It helps to keep me positive.”

Valerie S. Weaver of Ephrata, Pa., will begin as **assistant editor of *Gospel Herald***, the Mennonite Church denominational publication, in mid-September.

Second year student Suzanne Schroyen organized an informal meeting on **Violence Against Women** at Columbia Bible College during the spring. Over 100 students attended and donated money to local campaigns against violence.

New publication: ***Snake in the Parsonage***, a new collection of poetry by Jean Janzen. Published by Good Books, 717-768-7171.

Eve MacMaster, editor of the Mennonite Church women's magazine, *Voice*, was speaker at "Peacemaking in the Nuclear Family," a New Call to Peacemaking Conference June 17 in Reading, Pa.

Resources on poverty

Organizations

Children's Defense Fund, 25 E Street NW, Washington, DC 20001. Research and advocacy organization. Publishes monthly CDE Reports and other excellent materials.

Statistics Canada. Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1A 0T6. Tel. 613-951-2603. Publishes monthly reports on topics related to the family and other social issues. Two recent reports are "Lone-parent Families in Canada" #89-522E, and "A Portrait of Families in Canada" #89-523E.

The Vanier Institute of the Family. 120 Holland Ave., Suite 300, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1Y 0X6. Research and reflection organization. Publishes significant studies on the family. "Profiling Canada's Families" and "What Matters for Canadian Families" are two recommended reports.

Printed/Video Resources

Beneria, Lourdes, and Shelley Feldman, eds. *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty, and Women's Work*. Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1992.

Critique of the ways in which structural adjustment policies are premised on an increasing burden of unpaid and underpaid work by women. Shows new possibilities for the transformation of oppressive gender and power relations, as seen in the responses of women to the current crises of daily survival.

Beyond the News: Homelessness. 25 minute VHS video cassette, produced in 1993 by Mennonite Board of Missions, Media Ministries, 1251 Virginia Ave., Harrisonburg, VA 22801-2497; 800-999-3534.

Explores issues such as money, security and power as they relate to homelessness. Available for sale for \$24.95 plus shipping from Media Ministries. Also available for loan from MCC Akron, Ontario and Saskatchewan.

Domestic Needs Packet. MCC Resource Library, Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500; 717-859-1151.

Focuses on poverty in the United States and looks at why people are poor. Includes worship resources and ideas for response. \$3U.S./\$4Cdn.

(continued on page 16)

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If your mailing label on the back page says "September/October 1995," this is your last issue. Please renew your subscription by **October 19** in order to continue receiving *Women's Concerns Report* without missing an issue. Make any corrections on the mailing label and return it with this form. Thank you!

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Women in ministry

Mary Dyck has been appointed chaplain at Schowalter Villa retirement Center in Hesston, Kan.

Joan Hockman has been licensed at Topeka (Ind.) Mennonite Church.

Judy Karmon is half-time pastor for Faith Mennonite Church, Downey, Calif.

Gladys Mungai was licensed as minister of Morning Star Church, Muncie, Ind.

Mary Lehman Yoder was licensed for ministry at Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.

Hewlett, Sylvia. *Child Neglect in Rich Nations*. UNICEF, New York, 1993.

Kotlowitz, Alex. *There are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*. Doubleday, N.Y., 1991.

Kozol, Johathan. *Rachael and Her Children*. Ballantine Books, N.Y., 1988.

A study of homelessness in the United States.

Russell, Betty. *Silent Sisters: A Study of Homeless Women*. Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, New York, 1991.

Sklar, Holly. *Jobs, Income and Work: Ruinous Trends, Urgent Alternatives*. Literature Resources, American Friends Service Committee, 1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102; 215-241-7167.

This excellent new paperback details the current reality of employment, unemployment and poverty in the United States. It includes analysis of the realities of gender and race as they

relate to poverty, and offers a vision for change. Cost is \$7, including postage.

Washington Memo, MCC, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

This bimonthly periodical edited by MCC U.S. Washington Office includes information on laws and policies under debate in the U.S. government on issues of economics and poverty. Write to MCC for a sample issue and subscription information.

Women and Children First: A Faith-based Perspective on Reforming Welfare, Women's Division, United Methodist Church, 100 Maryland Ave. NE, Box 56, Washington D.C. 20002.

This packet contains resources for doing an educational workshop on women, children and welfare. Jointly produced by United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ and National Council of Churches, the packet contains a 20-minute video, a leader's guide, fact and action sheets, and a theological basis for work on poverty and welfare reform. Cost is \$15 plus \$4 for postage and handling.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Kristina Mast Burnett. Layout by Beth Oberholtzer.

Subscription cost is \$12 U.S./\$15 Cdn. for one year or \$20 U.S./\$25 Cdn. for two years. Send all subscriptions, correspondence and address changes to Editor, MCC Women's Concerns, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500; telephone 717-859-3889; fax 717-859-3875. Canadian subscribers may pay in Canadian currency.

This newsletter is printed on recycled paper.

Women's Concerns Committee seeks new member

The MCC U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns (CWC) is seeking names of women from U.S. Mennonite Brethren churches, willing to consider being the MB representative to the committee. Members of CWC meet twice yearly to help set agenda for the committee and the staff person. MCC pays travel and committee costs.

To request information for yourself, or to recommend a friend, contact Kristina Mast Burnett, MCC U.S. Women's Concerns, Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500; telephone 717-859-3889; fax 717-859-3875. Please respond by October 16.



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